

PITTSBURG POST-GAZETTE

Editorial: Pious sermons / Bush is not doing enough for energy conservation

Thursday, October 06, 2005

The energy legislation President Bush signed Monday won't lower gasoline prices anytime soon, lessen our dependence on foreign oil or allocate any more federal money to help poor families or strapped seniors heat their homes this winter when energy prices skyrocket.

What it will do is extend daylight saving time, give tax breaks to buyers of hybrid cars and expedite the building of nuclear power plants. It makes a lovely gift for energy companies.

And not a cheap one. The cost will be \$12.3 billion over 10 years. Energy companies will get billions in tax breaks and loan guarantees for new nuclear plants, clean coal and wind. Consumers will get tax credits for hybrids and energy-saving home improvements, as well as three extra weeks of sunny evenings in the spring and one more in the fall.

Expect to hear exhortations in the coming weeks to drive slower, add insulation, use compact fluorescent lights and turn down your thermostat. Government employees have already been advised to trim nonessential travel, carpool, tele-commute and take public transit. White House staffers have been told to turn off the copiers when they go home.

That's the Bush conservation program.

The administration comes very late to the energy-efficiency party and is now doing as little as it can while trying to sound pious and responsible. "Most of the serious problems," Mr. Bush said Monday, "such as high gasoline costs or the rising dependence on foreign oil, have developed over decades. It's going to take years of focused efforts to alleviate those problems."

But Americans have known about these problems for decades. How focused are the new efforts, when the administration has no goal for energy savings?

Instead of more money in the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, we'll get the Department of Energy's Energy Hog campaign with its porky mascot (sponsors include Home Depot and the North American Insulation Manufacturers Association).

Vice President Dick Cheney has said mere conservation is a "sign of personal virtue, but it is not a sufficient basis of a sound energy policy." He is right, and the administration can play an effective role. Instead of opposing tougher Corporate Average Fuel Economy standards, it can embrace them.

Nearly half of U.S. daily oil consumption is poured into our rides, and tomorrow the House will consider a bipartisan bill to raise vehicle fuel-economy standards and reduce the juice use by 2.6 million barrels a day. The Boehlert-Markey bill would take CAFE standards from the average of 25 mpg to 33 mpg by 2016 and close the SUV loophole.

The burden of addressing the new energy crisis needn't fall exclusively on consumers. The government can do its part with higher CAFE standards and more stringent efficiency for appliances. Oil is a costly and dangerous addiction: We will never produce enough for our needs. And some of the oil money we send abroad is enriching our enemies.

Vague appeals to personal virtue are no substitute for leadership. As China and India boom and their thirst for energy grows, the crunch is only going to get worse. It's time for fewer sermons and more action.